

in-circles phase—to a Trappist monastery in Kentucky, the Abbey of Gethsemani, where Thomas Merton is buried beneath a plain white cross in the graveyard out back, and where the monks practice the vows of silence. In the front lobby of the guest house there is a guest register that, in addition to having columns for name and address, has one for "Observations." And under that heading are the most eloquent arguments I have ever encountered for the benedictions of silence:

"3rd annual retreat here."

"I, the poet, stand wordless at your gates."

"In silence, a goal is set and a decision made."

"A return to the deep well of peace."

"I came to talk, discuss and argue. I learned to listen."

"For once I let God do all the talking."

"The eye of the hurricane."

"A welcome comma in my life."

"Where is the man who has no need of words? There is the man I would like to talk to."

"A place out of this world to go to, so that I have the strength to go back into it."

"Beyond words."

"A point of stillness in the search for the stillpoint."

"In this silence, the thread of the world is kept from breaking."

"Abhhhh."

C O N S U L T Y O U R D E A T H

Sometimes my partner, Robin, will leave the house on some errand, turn around halfway down the front steps, and come back to where I'm standing at the door. "Forget something?" I'll ask. "Yeah," she says, looking me in the eye and stroking my face with her hand. "I just wanted to look at you in case I never see you again."

I have good-byes because I always prefer to assume that I will see people again. It obviates the need for all that awkwardness; it avoids the issue, which is that we may never see each other again. Saying good-bye is understanding that existential fact. Our paths may never cross again.

The first time Robin did this, I simply couldn't take it in. "You're only going shopping." I reminded her, as if the sheer mundaneness of it was a minor-

ante of safety. Her remark was too full of truth and foreboding for me to let it in. With each such farewell I've become better at receiving it, though when it really sinks in, a hot shot of adrenaline tends to thump through my solar plexus, similar to the sensation of falling when an airplane hits an air pocket. Impermanence is one of the things we share with those we love. We can go at any moment.

I have kept a file for years on some of the abrupt and unnatural ways in which we make exits from life, "in the swish of a horse's tail," as Confucius said. Hit by a bolt of lightning that comes right through the telephone. Killed by a meteor. Struck by a truck tire flying over the median strip at seventy miles an hour that crashes through your windshield. Being drowned in molasses when a truck carrying a ton of it tips over.

Thomas Merton once remarked that in considering any important decision in life, it's imperative to "consult your death" because, as the English writer Samuel Johnson once put it, "When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." Death is a strip search. It points the barrel of morality at your head and demands to see what you have hidden under your garments. It also asks the question "What do you love?" As you listen for callings keep such a question poised in your mind to help tune out some of the static. In fact, "What do you love" is the question that callings pose.

Many years ago, I interviewed a number of people who were *forced* to consult their deaths because their doctors had told them that they were dying. A few of them were shattered by the news, but most were liberated. They spoke about feeling no longer trapped by life, feeling free to speak their minds and follow their hearts, free from imaginary fears, tyrannical conformities and plesantries, and petty authorities. One woman told me that her cancer diagnosis was "not a death sentence, but a life sentence." She no longer wondered how to spend her precious nick of time. Her passions and loves were finally released.

Because I tend to turn away from the subject of death myself, from acknowledging that, as an acquaintance of mine put it, I have an expiration date, I find that visual aids help to focus my attention. For instance, I keep rolled up and stashed in the closet in my office a large X ray of my own skeleton, from the top of my skull to the bottom of my pelvis. It was taken by the chiropractor who worked on my back after a diving accident tore up some of the ligaments in my lower back. I remember that X ray from times to time first in

gape at my innards. One's own skeleton is a thing both monstrous and divine and points to only one conclusion: There is a kingdom come and I'm in for it. There will come a day when I die and do not rise, so I would rather die doing what I love than what I don't. Everybody should have a memento mori, like my X ray, somewhere in their house.

For similar effect, I also visit *ruins* whenever I can, for they, too, are skeletons of a sort. When I travel, I prefer going to places where they abound: the crumbling walls of stone fortresses still bearing the scars of cannonballs, the remains of mummies blown out of the sand by the wind, the broken rim of a volcano whose eruption destroyed an entire civilization—anything to remind me that every castle, like the sun, goes down.

I remember my father telling me once of hosting a friend from Europe who laughed at him when with great enthusiasm he led him through some New England woods to the site of an old log cabin from the 1800s. That's no ruin, his friend scoffed. A mere hundred years old. People *live* that long. Ruins, he said, have to remind you that all your greatest efforts, all the greatest efforts of even hundreds of generations of men and women, thousands of years of human history, will yield nothing absolute, nothing that will last, and that the great thing, the real accomplishment, is building your house in full view of the volcano.

two

THE CHALLENGE
OF FININDING
CLARITY

In the marble corridors of an Egyptian temple, a man glimpses a veiled statue and is warned that underneath the veil is Truth, and that mortals must not look upon it. He cannot resist laying his eyes on Truth, though, so he sneaks into the temple one night and unveils it. In the morning, the priests discover him knocked senseless, lying at the foot of the statue.

✽

When Ann Kreilkamp was twenty-six years old, Truth came flapping out of the wild place in her life, cloaked in the sackcloth of illness, and propelled her into an immense struggle to figure out what it meant. Was it a call? If so, from where was it coming, why, and what sort of response was it calling for? Furthermore, how would she know that whatever response she devised was the right one?

The year was 1969. She was in graduate school, married with children, trying to be all things to all people: the perfect mom, perfect wife, perfect